unearthing Cultural Wellness

THRough dance

Cultural Dances

Date: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

**Summary:**

In this session, we explored examples of cultural dances including African Dance (with a focus on West Africa), The New Zealand “Haka” dance, and the “Tinkling” and “Carinosa” folk dances from the Philippines. Through these selections, we saw how the language of dance is universal. Commonalities across all forms of dance include how they connect us socially, the way music and movement resonate in our bodies, and how dance can be used in storytelling and celebration.

*“The one thing that you have that nobody else has is you. Your voice, your mind, your story, your vision.* *So write and draw and build and play and dance and live as only you can.” – Neal Gaiman*

# NOTES:

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UNEARTHING CULTURAL WELLNESS Through DANCE

Cultural Dances

# A Brief History of African Dance

For as long as humans have roamed the Earth, African dance has been in existence, typically accompanied by vocalization and rhythmic percussion used to represent every aspect of African life. The dances and music are used in celebration, in rites of passage and spiritual ritual, in wartime, in day-to-day work, and to pass on tribal knowledge from generation to generation.

Africa is more than three times the size of the United States, home to 54 countries, and 3000 tribes, and has 11 official languages among the 2000 languages spoken. And yet, there is a commonality in how African culture approaches the integration of music, dance, song, and storytelling.

Types of Dances

Most African dances fall into three main categories. **Ritual** (or religious) Dances, which include dances for rain, a good harvest, celebrating a new chief, and summoning ancestors**; Ceremonial** Dances to celebrate weddings, rites of passage, successful hunting seasons and welcome visitors; and **Griotic** Dances, originally only performed by a tribal historian, but have since evolved to include other members of the tribe. Griotic dances tell the oral history of their people, which became even more critical to the survival of African culture and tribal knowledge after the African Diaspora.

African diasporic dances were a result of the great “scattering” or diaspora. It began with the slave trade in Portugal in the 15th century and continued into the 19th century. Early on, African traders brought the slave trade to Europe, the Middle East, and Asia. At the height of the diaspora, the European transatlantic slave trade brought Africans to North America, the Caribbean, and South and Central America, a large percentage having come primarily from West and Central Africa and Mozambique. It is estimated that between 10-and 13 million Africans were enslaved and displaced throughout the Americas during this time.

In America, out of slavery came new dances, such as the ring shout, which “allowed” slaves to worship while being slowly converted to Christianity. It is characterized by many elements found in traditional African dance, such as a sustained rhythm, clapping, stomps, and shuffling of the feet. On plantations in the US, music and dance included field hollers, call-and-response, shouts and cries, and additional sounds made from homemade instruments such as pots, spoons, washboards, and calabashes. In the 1740s some states banned the use of drums in slave communities because they feared it would create a system of communication to support a rebellion … and as history showed, their fears were valid.

Many slave dances were permitted because it kept slaves healthier and in a better frame of mind – leading to better productivity — not realizing that what was happening, was the survival of entire rituals and spiritual traditions, and in later years, during the Underground Railroad (an effort to help slaves escape to free states), spiritual songs were used to convey hidden messages among slaves to aid in their escape.

Out of the African diasporic dance came international dances such as the Charleston, cakewalk, Lindy Hop, bossa nova, and twist, and it also influenced ballet, modern dance, and Broadway.

### Characteristics of the Dance

The characteristics of African dances include polyrhythmic movement, call and response techniques, improvisation, circular movements and repetition, pantomime, and spiritual elements.

* **Polyrhythmic** — where the body performs two or more simultaneous rhythms with the chest, hips, arms, and legs. Dancers often bend at the waist and hips to bring them closer to the Earth. Dances include elaborate isolations, and angular and asymmetrical moves.
* **Call and Response** — This can be the dancers answering the call of a drum with vocalization, movement or a dialogue between the drummer and dancers.
* **Improvisation** — Dancers are encouraged to practice self-expression to connect to the community and to the divine.
* **Circular Movement/Repetition** — Dances represent the circle of life and the connection with ancestors and those who will follow — life is a continuum, with repetition making the dance more powerful and energetic the longer it continues.
* **Pantomime** — Such as imitating the stomping of an elephant or the flight of a bird. Pantomime imitates nature.
* **Spiritual Transformation (**“flash of spirit”) — African dance connects the tribe to one another and to the Divine.

### Why is Cultural Dance Important?

The many benefits of dance include better physical health (such as improving your heart and lungs, developing muscle strength, greater agility, and flexibility, increased aerobic fitness, etc.,) and mental health (such as improved memory, better decision-making, reduced anxiety, etc.), but African Dances also show us social and intergenerational bonds within a tribe, the deep spiritual connection and sense of individual purpose with nature and ancestry, and deep gratitude for having bodies that move and support us throughout our lives.

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# A Brief History of The Philippines

The Philippines, officially called The Republic of the Philippines, is a nation of 7,640 islands in Southeast Asia in the western Pacific Ocean. It is a country of multiple ethnicities and religions. It was first “discovered” by the western world by the Portuguese explorer Ferdinand Magellan sailing under the flag of Spain in 1521. In 1543 it was given its name to honor King Philip II of Spain. For 300 years, the Philippines was a Spanish colony, and so much of its culture, including dance, reflects that Spanish influence. However, the indigenous people, called Negritos also have influenced what today is considered a unique Filipino culture. The language of the Philippines is Tagalog and English. The United States acquired the Philippines in 1896 after the Spanish American War. It became an independent nation after WW II in 1946.

# Folk Dances of the Philippines

Filipinos are peaceful, family-oriented, hard-working, and loving people. Their culture celebrates their relationships with each other and with the natural world. Their many folk dances reflect these values and celebrate daily living, health, peace, and harvest. The dances imitate nature and are an important part of the rituals and celebrations of the culture. They dance for fun, and to create community. Although there is no official national dance, there are two that are consistently considered as such.

**Tinikling** is a unique folk dance that originated on Leyte Island. It is performed with long bamboo poles which are held close to the ground by kneeling participants (clappers) and tapped together on the third beat of a triple meter rhythm. The dancers step between the moving bamboo poles usually to the music of guitars. The dance name comes from a common bird, the Tikling Bird, and imitates its walk between grass stems and tree branches. It is also said to imitate the bird’s ability to dodge bamboo traps. The dance is taught in schools as an aerobic exercise and coordination developer.

**The Carinosa** (affectionate one) is a courting dance from the island of Panay. This dance has deep Hispanic roots from Spain’s three centuries of colonization. This dance displays a coy, hide-and-seek quality with the use of props such as a fan or handkerchief. It is also called the dance of love.

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# Haka

Imagine a culture that uses the whole body to communicate, to build energy known as ‘ihi’ (e-he) that unites emotionally, physically, and spiritually by expressing passion, strength, and determination. The Māori culture does just that through haka, which means dance.

The Māori people were the first inhabitants of Aotearoa (au·tee·uh·**row**·uh), known as New Zealand today. Aotearoa means long white cloud in the Māori language. It describes what the first permanent settlers, the Māori, saw from a distance 800 years ago. When they arrived in New Zealand, they took on a certain form of haka (ceremonial dance) to represent themselves and their ancestors.

The legend of the haka has different versions as it has been passed down through song and story. The most common stories suggest it comes from the son of the Sun God - Tama-nui-te-ra and his wife, Hine-raumati, who represents the spirit of summer. Their son, known as the prince of haka, would celebrate the upcoming summer by dancing for his mother while quivering his hands to represent the shimmering appearance of the summer heatwaves.

Haka is traditionally known as a war cry or dance performed by men using weapons before battle. During the pre-battle haka, the women would intently watch the men and judge if they were in harmony and moving as one. If the women decided the men were ready, they would join and perform a return haka. This was a good sign for battle readiness, at which point the elders and priests would allow going to war. The haka was also a way to call on the god of war for support in the battle. Performing a haka in front of the enemy with aggressive facial expressions, grunts, and waving weapons was a tactic used to intimidate the opponent. By causing fear and hesitation in the enemy, the Māori warriors hoped to de-escalate the situation and avoid battle.

Kapa haka is considered a form of the Māori performing arts. Kapa haka translates to a row or line (kapa) dance (haka). It is performed by a group and includes a chant or song. The tradition of performing the kapa haka, demonstrating pride and community, is passed down through generations. Today, men, women, and children dance together in the kapa haka. This form of dance and celebration was traditionally performed to welcome visitors to the community. Today it is commonly performed to honor special occasions such as weddings, funerals, and birthdays.

### Movements of the Haka:

Although there are many types of haka that are unique to each iwi or community, there are some common body motions and expressions in all haka performances. Here are a few:

**Stamping of feet (waewae takahia) -** represents connecting to “earth Mother” Papatuanuku, keeping to her heartbeat. The wide stance is used by men to symbolize aggression and strength. Women use a more of a neutral stance in their performance.

**Slapping the thighs and body** is used as a percussion instrument.

**The trembling of hands (wiriwiri)** – symbolizing shimmering waters, heat waves, or breeze and symbolizing the Sun God’s son’s dance.

**Facial expressions** (**pukana)** are a very important part of the haka. They emphasize the meaning of the haka and represent the passion and strength of the performer. The expressions are different for men and women.

* Men stretch out their tongue, widen or bulge their eyes, flare their nostrils, and grit their teeth supplemented by groans and grunts. This shows their rebelliousness and masculinity.
* Women widely open their eyes, stick out their chin and position their lips in a frown.

The Māori culture is warm and inviting, creating a sense of inclusivity and community for all. Anyone can learn, practice, and perform the haka if it is done with respect and sincerity.

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kaizen step

1) What type of dance do I want to learn? (Example: A group line dance)

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2) One step I could take to participate in a certain dance: (Example: Find places in community that offer Western Line Dance classes)

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3) Ways I can break step (#2) into smaller actions: (List as many actions you can think of such as: Ask neighbors, look at Recreation Center/YMCA schedule, ask fitness instructor, google classes near me, decide to visit and view a class, etc.)

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